
Measuring What Matters: A New Way of Thinking About Crime and Public Order



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Here is a public policy paradox: New Yorkers are frantic over what seems to them the increasing lawlessness of the city. Crime and fear are consistently among the top two or three reasons cited by New Yorkers who say they want to leave town. Yet according to professional standards and the most common statistical measurements, the New York City police departments are among the best in the country, especially after taking into account their size and the problems they face.

For generations, police have tried to develop a model of policing that is equitable, accountable, efficient, lawful, and honest. They have largely succeeded: In the quest for equity, police are distributed across cities on the basis of crime rates and calls for service—seemingly objective criteria. To be unobtrusive, police have relied on responding to citizens' calls for help, rather than initiating action on their own. To ensure lawfulness, police have focused their resources on serious crimes—murder, rape, assault, robbery, and burglary—acts prohibited by unambiguous laws and about which a broad consensus exists that police should take strong action. To ensure honesty, police have limited contacts with possible sources of corruption, including citizens.

By these measures, New York City is excellently policed: Its departments, especially the New York City Police Department, distribute police equitably throughout the city, respond quickly to 911 calls (especially considering the enormous volume here), are unobtrusive (despite rare and highly publicized exceptions), have concentrated on serious crime, and maintain high levels of integrity. Among professionals, the NYPD is widely believed to be one of the “cleanest” very large departments in the country.

Even by more widely touted measurements, New York police do relatively well; so many people have been arrested that neither jails nor prisons can hold them.

If the number of cells was expanded, few doubt that New York City police could fill almost any added capacity as well. Crime rates are also encouraging, at least compared to other large cities. In 1989, eight large American cities had higher homicide rates than New York City, 21 had higher rape rates, 17 had higher burglary rates, and eight had higher automotive theft rates. The differences were not trivial: Washington's murder rate was almost 2.8 times as high as New York's; Cleveland's rape rate 3.5 times higher; Dallas's burglary rate twice as high. Only in robbery did New York lead the nation, and not by much.

But New Yorkers are not the least bit reassured by these statistical and relative achievements. One prominent local political leader eager to discover his constituents' concerns recently gathered some New Yorkers in “focus groups” to discuss major issues. When he asked them to react to the statement “New York City is tough on crime,” their response was incredulous laughter.

The citizens are right. These formal measures of police work have little to do with community needs. After all, even after decades of increase, individual serious crimes remain relatively rare. But if a typical annual increase in the mugging rate does not materially increase the chances that one will be mugged, neither does a similar decrease reduce the real harm done to those who are not mugged—which is to make them afraid and cheat them out of a little bit more of their lives. Lawlessness consists not just in the relatively rare “index” crimes counted by the FBI, but can also refer to an atmosphere of disorder in which it seems like these and less serious crimes and harassments might occur at any time. Lawlessness locks neighbors behind doors, chases storeowners off streets, shuts down business, and spreads poverty and despair.

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Still, twice a year when the official FBI crime statistics are released and the *Times* announces, “New York Leads Big Cities in Robbery Rate, but Drops in Murders,” and the *Post* and the *News* chip in with their more-colorful versions, police officials frantically counter with their own numbers that show how well they are doing. Even now, when “community policing” (which is supposed to deemphasize statistics) is all the fashion, police chiefs know that every time the ritual is repeated, the political powers-that-be will call them on the carpet and the powers-that-would-be will call press conferences. Police strategy, tactics, and even police mythology and esprit de corps are driven by statistical and bureaucratic measures of performance. The result is disastrous for the community.

Ironically, the statistics police find most nettlesome, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, were invented by The International Association of Chiefs of Police in the 1920s. The original UCR index consisted of seven crimes: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. In 1979, arson was added to the list. The UCR also include data on crimes cleared (someone was arrested), on the people who were arrested, and on law enforcement personnel. Victimization surveys supplement the UCR by providing additional information about victims and offenders in crimes which may never have been reported.

Once chiefs had high hopes for the UCR, believing that reported crime and clearance rates would provide “scientific” measures of the nature and extent of serious crime and of the relative effectiveness of police departments. And during the comparatively quiet years of the Forties and the Fifties, police were quick to claim credit for the relatively low reported crime rates.

In the Sixties, this honeymoon ended. Crime levels, in the statistics and in the minds of citizens, became intolerable. As the crisis worsened and became a bigger national story, the UCR framed the problem for the media, the general public, and therefore for politicians and police as well. The crime problem was reduced to the seven crimes on the index; important crime-control activities were clearances and arrests for index crimes. Police departments, broadsided biannually with bad news, became obsessed not only with statistics, but also with statistical responses. They pointed with pride to figures showing that arrests were up, response times were faster, police were working hard,

and criminals were going to jail. And by all these quantifiable standards, their departments were indeed going well. If crime still raged after such prodigious efforts, it could hardly be the fault of the police. Better to blame lazy prosecutors, lenient judges, push-over probation officers. And don’t forget the liberals. Got a problem, buddy? Tell it to Earl Warren.

If it had only been a dodge for the press and the pols, it would not have been so bad. Unfortunately it is hard to say things too often without coming to believe them, and in any event bureaucracies of all sorts love numbers, which hold out the promise of order and accountability, a way of toting up the score at the end of the game. Unfortunately crime, arrest, and response reports not only fail to keep an accurate score, they also confuse everybody about the object of the game.

While low levels of recorded crime may conceivably reflect low crime rates, they can also reflect a lack of confidence in police. It is well known, for instance, that about half of all rapes are ever reported to police. Women fail to report rapes because of embarrassment, fear, and guilt—emotions that depend in part on how police agencies handle rape victims and their cases. So what does the difference between Cleveland’s and New York’s rate mean? Is it true that there are more rapes in Cleveland than in New York? Are New York police to be credited with being more efficient? Or are women in Cleveland more confident that they will be treated sensitively by police and other criminal justice agencies in Cleveland?

What about burglary? Does Dallas have more burglaries than New York? Perhaps. But another explanation is that burglary victims in New York City have simply come to expect so little from police that they often do not report the crime.

The UCR’s stiff legal categories say little about the crime problem as citizens actually experience it. The popular conception is that serious crimes are acts committed by ruthless predators against innocent strangers. In 1989, however, more than 40 percent of violent crimes, including one-third of all rapes, were committed not by strangers, but by friends, lovers, spouses, and colleagues. Within families and relationships, abuse can be repeated over and over with increasing ferocity and suffering. Society has an enormous investment in the institutions in which these victimizations occur: family, schools, the workplace, just to mention three.

For communities, the intent of crimes often is more important than the actual crime itself. Generally, we consider vandalism a relatively minor crime, often committed by obstreperous youth. It does not show up on the UCR. Yet a swastika painted on the door of a Jewish home or a cross burned in front of a black family's home often has more serious consequences than a random robbery or burglary. Such vandalism demoralizes communities, destabilizes neighborhoods, and terrorizes families.

Arrest counts are no more reliable than the UCR. Consider the following: An officer sees a dispute between a Korean merchant and a black citizen. The officer stays at a distance observing the dispute. It flares into violence. The officer moves in to stop the violence and proceeds to arrest both of the citizens. Tensions increase in the neighborhood, but two arrests are chalked up for the officer.

Is this a success? Should the officer and department be credited for this performance? Or were the arrests really indications of failure? Would it not have been better to intercede earlier and prevent the violence that not only threatened the individuals' well-being, but the community's peace?

Obviously. And in such a situation most New York City police officers almost certainly would have done the right thing. Yet it is important to note that if the officer had stepped in to defuse the incident, perhaps sparing the community months of anguish, his action would never have been recorded. That suggests a serious problem, not only in providing recognition for officers, but also in keeping the department accountable to the community and focused on its real needs.

Likewise, consider the much-studied problem of graffiti on subway trains. For over a decade, while police had been unable to reduce subway graffiti, arrests for graffiti increased year by year and were touted by the Transit Police Department whenever it was queried about the problem. Then Transit Authority President David Gunn instituted a successful program to eliminate graffiti—a program based not on arrests but on quickly cleaning cars and painting over graffiti so as to frustrate the “artists” and create the impression that the TA [Transit Authority] took the antigraffiti rules seriously. Arrests immediately dropped and stayed at a low level throughout the five-year effort. The earlier volume of arrests had indicated failing policy, not success.

If the volume of arrests says little about the effectiveness of police performance, another favorite set of police statistics, the number and speed of responses to emergency calls, are equally uninformative. The anti-crime potential of 911 was once thought to be quite high. Research and experience, however, have suggested that though rapid responses to calls for service have very limited impact on crime, they consume enormous amounts of police time. This view is now widely shared by police and police scholars, although less so by city policymakers and politicians, for whom 911 has become a symbol of being “tough on crime.” Former Police Commissioner Ben Ward put the trade-offs starkly at a meeting of community leaders, one of whom complained, “We have our neighborhood foot patrol officer, we now want rapid response to calls for service.” Ward's response was refreshingly frank: “You can't have both.”

As I have previously noted, since the 1960s, research has confirmed that crime, as well as the fear of crime, is closely associated with disorder. Disorder includes petty crime and inappropriate behavior such as public drunkenness, panhandling, and loitering; its physical manifestations include graffiti, abandoned cars, broken windows, and abandoned buildings. For most people, New York's crime problem comes down to the fear they endure as a consequence of disorder—the well-founded belief that in disorderly places society has ceded control to those who are on the margin of or outside the law, and therefore that anything might happen in such places.

I say this belief is well-founded because both experience and substantial formal research demonstrate that disorder left untended ultimately leads to serious crime. Citizens' fear of disorder is entirely rational. Fighting disorder, by solving the problems that cause it, is clearly one of the best ways to fight serious crimes, reduce fear, and give citizens what they actually want from the police force.

Yet disorder and police efforts (or lack thereof) to eliminate it have recently been largely ignored by official police doctrine. The reasons for that are many and complex, ranging from the belief that uncivil, threatening, and bizarre behavior is a constitutional right, to fears created by past police abuse of statutes prohibiting disorderly behavior. But a significant reason disorder has been ignored is that professional criminal justice ideology narrowly defines the appropriate business of police and criminal justice agencies as

dealing with serious crime—that is, index crimes. Crime, response, and arrest statistics form a pillar of that ideology. Disorder does not appear on any FBI index; therefore, it has not been a priority.

Community policing, which is being put into place in this city [New York] slowly and with considerable difficulty, is supposed to take disorder seriously. But community policing itself is hampered by the tools police use to measure the crime problem and police performance. There is a great gap between the current bureaucratically defined measures of productivity and the kinds of help communities really want from their police. Levels of fear and disorder, evidence of mounting community tension, and, most importantly, information about the specific sources of such difficulties and police response to such problems, go officially uncounted.

Can we develop new measures of performance, measures more in line with what communities really need and want? Can we quantify the “soft” indicators that really matter to communities? Or are we doomed, like the man who lost his keys in the alley but searches for them under the street light, to keep looking in the wrong place because it is too hard to turn our attention where it belongs?

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, a series of independent studies tried to define New York’s real crime problem. Citizens, neighborhood groups, business associations, and others examined community problems, at times in collaboration with police and criminal justice officials, but often without any official support. With remarkable consistency, the studies tell us what citizens want government to do. Implicitly, and in at least one case explicitly, they tell us how to measure community crime problems and police response.

One of these studies, “Downtown Safety, Security, and Economic Development,” was published by the Citizen’s Crime Commission of New York City and the Regional Plan Association in July 1985. As Laurence A. Alexander wrote in the preface:

Working with both city officials and with developers, it was clear that many private and public downtown investment decisions were being killed by underlying nagging worries over the safety and security of people and of investments.

At the same time, I saw many studies that showed downtowns were not necessarily high-crime areas (especially not with respect to so-called serious crimes). But, nevertheless, shoppers, workers, bosses, and bankers were all convinced that crime was rampant downtown.

It was very clear that this problem—to some degree real and to some degree a matter of perception only—was a major deterrent to rational downtown planning, development, marketing, and management.

The report went on to document fear of crime in downtown Brooklyn, Fordham Road in the Bronx, and Jamaica Center in Queens. The results were stark: Almost 60 percent of those surveyed believed that if they went to these areas their car would probably be stolen or broken into; 40 percent believed that they would be attacked, beaten, or raped; and 75 percent believed that they would have their money, wallets, or purses stolen.

Confirming earlier research, the study found strong correlations between levels of fear in the area and the amount of drug use and sale, public drinking, street gangs, loitering teenagers, and graffiti. The consequences of fear were considerable: People stayed off the streets and avoided public transportation and “multi-purpose visits” (that is, shopping).

While “Downtown Safety” documented citizens’ fears about shopping in commercial centers, a report called “Small Business, Big Problem,” published in May 1989 by the New York think tank Interface, focused on the impact of the crime problem on commercial establishments. The organization surveyed 353 small businesses—retailers, service companies, manufacturers, and wholesalers with an average of 27 employees—in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

Direct losses from crime, especially from break-ins, vandalism, shoplifting, and auto thefts, were high. More than 80 percent of the firms reported being victimized during the previous three years. Crime, and the fear of crime, also took an indirect financial toll on those firms in the form of increased labor costs from high employee turnover, reduced sales, and curbed expansion plans. The neighborhood conditions

most often cited as causes of these difficulties included loitering, drug dealing, panhandling, illegal peddling, and in manufacturing and wholesale areas, prostitution.

Thus, even in an area where indexed crimes were a serious part of the problem, merchants specifically cited disorderly conditions as a major difficulty and were able to point to consequences. The section of the report devoted to solutions specifically recommended measures usually associated with maintaining order and reducing fear—foot patrols, community policing and neighborhood watches.

Another study, “CPOP: the Research—An Evaluative Study of the New York City Community Patrol Officer Program,” published by the Vera Institute of Justice in 1990, offers insights into the problems of primarily residential neighborhoods. Their analysis of a set of reports by CPOP (community policing) officers and a survey of community leaders is particularly interesting.

CPOP officers used “Beat Books” to record the types of problems with which they dealt. The problems that citizens complained about most often were drugs (29 percent), parking and traffic (16 percent), disorderly groups (14 percent), auto larceny (10 percent), and prostitution or gambling (6 percent). Burglary and robbery followed at 5 percent each. Explaining “drugs” as a priority, the authors indicate: “These were typically problems of fairly low-level street dealing, rather than large volume trafficking.”

None of the top five problems was an index crime. Yet all five contribute to perceptions that one’s neighborhood is out of control, that one’s turf is not secure. Even parking and traffic problems can add to such fears, particularly if residents believe the source of the problem is “outsiders”—fast drivers using residential streets as throughways; unfamiliar cars parking on residential streets; increasing the number of strangers and making it difficult to tell who has a good reason for being there.

Turning to the survey of neighborhood leaders, the report states: “Very few respondents who lived in predominantly white, middle-class, residential areas identified robbery or burglary as problems.” Or as the president of a merchants’ association reported:

“Is there a crime problem now?” Yes. We have eggs splattered on our store windows, but we don’t have stick-ups. Commercial crime involves shoplifting and pickpocketing in the larger stores. There is also residential crime, which involves burglaries. But no, we don’t have a crime problem of any grave consequence.

Certainly neither the authors of the report nor I would want to give the impression that these responses are typical of all of New York’s neighborhoods. Violence among youths is endemic in many areas and should be the highest priority for community leaders, public health officials, police and criminal justice officials, and political leaders. Nonetheless, the experience of community organizers, confirmed by my own research, is that disorder is as much or more of a problem in middle- and working-class neighborhoods, even in neighborhoods that are seriously marred by violence.

Like other purveyors of goods or services, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority regularly conducts market research to learn about user satisfaction, market potential, and problems in service delivery. My own research as a consultant to the TA, using surveys, focus groups, and other data, confirms that fear has seriously hindered the public’s use of subways.

Ninety-seven percent of passengers report taking some form of defensive action when riding the subway: They stay away from certain types of people, locations, cars, and exits. Forty percent of New Yorkers believe that reducing crime is the top priority for improving the subway. Only 9 percent believe the subway is safe after 8 p.m.; 76 percent disagree with the statement that there is very little chance you will be a crime victim if you ride the subway after that time; and 62 percent say that fear of crime keeps them from riding the subway at night. Overall, those questioned estimated that about 25 percent of the city’s serious crime occurred in the subway.

These perceptions are important. But they are not accurate. In reality, only 3 percent of New York City’s recorded felonies occur in the subway. By some estimates, only one in 200,000 subway trips is marred by a confrontation felony, which means most New Yorkers could ride the subway regularly for hundreds of years without being part of such an incident.

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So why are people afraid? Though they rarely experience serious crime, they are constantly exposed to disorder and left with the impression that no one is in charge. Broken turnstiles, litter, graffiti, the homeless, and panhandlers threaten riders and lead New Yorkers to believe that serious crime is more frequent. Fare-beating and other turnstile scams not only amplify this message, but also cost the system as much as \$120 million annually.

What do subway riders want? First, more police. Second, order: 84 percent of survey respondents agree that it is important for police to stop fare-beaters and 65 percent believe that the homeless should be removed from the subway.

In sum, studies of commercial centers, neighborhoods, and subways all call for increased attention to quality-of-life offenses including disorder and drug dealing and for new partnerships between police, citizens, neighborhoods, and businesses. They ask for community policing, often endorsing CPOP by name, and for foot patrols. These studies are hardly exhaustive, but they tend to confirm what common sense and experience suggest: The professionalized, bureaucratized preoccupations of police organizations do not reflect the concerns of most citizens. Police and policymakers must undertake a systematic effort to discover what citizens want from police, what problems are really undermining communities, and how effective police are in fighting them. What these studies have done in fragmentary and informal ways is what formal law enforcement evaluations ought to be doing. We need a new sort of database that will shift the attention of press and politicians alike away from the UCR and arrest and response reports and toward citizens' real problems.

Ironically, in the late 1970s the New York City Police Department performed an experiment called "Operation Crossroads" that nearly did just that, although without actually meaning to. Unfortunately, the experimental program was allowed to die and the NYPD never capitalized on what it learned. As described in an unpublished study by the Fund for the City of New York, one of the program's funders, the program's goal was to clean up Times Square, which suffered from the same problems it does today: prostitution, hustling, gambling, scams, and drug dealing.

Even then, the consequences of disorderly conditions were intuitively understood:

Police and other enforcement officials believe that certain types of street conditions such as the number, type, and frequency of street solicitations, the number of individuals loitering in doorways, and storefront uses and their hours of operations do contribute to . . . serious crime. At the very least, offensive street conditions are perceived as dangerous and threatening to the public They are a primary contributor to the negative image of Times Square, part of a self-perpetuating cycle of decay.

Before Operation Crossroads, police in the area relied on repeated aggressive "sweeps" as their main cleanup tactic. They would identify a problem area, mobilize a squad of officers, and arrest all those who were loitering. Little was accomplished. The troublemakers were often back on the streets sooner than the officers who arrested them. Sweeps consumed enormous amount of police time and were eventually declared unconstitutional.

Operation Crossroads addressed three separate but linked questions. First, could counts of disorder be useful in assigning police officers to particular beats or neighborhoods? Second, were alternative tactics available that were both legal and successful in reducing disorderly conditions? Third, could the same counts of disorderly conditions be used to evaluate police tactics for reducing disorder?

Researchers established a procedure for documenting disorder. Trained observers counted incidents of disorderly behavior in specific areas. Disorderly behavior was defined to include solicitation or sale of sex or drugs, use of drugs or alcohol by loitering people, all non-food vendors, and several categories of loiterers including vagrants, troubled persons, three-card monte dealers, other gamblers, handbillers, and hawkers.

It developed that although the entire Times Square area was viewed as disorderly, the problems tended to concentrate on a few blocks. And while disorder continued throughout the day, the ratio of disorderly persons to other street users changed as evening

approached, thus making the area seem more threatening. But perhaps most important was the discovery that disorderly conditions could actually be quantified in this manner.

Armed with these new data on disorder, the police decided on a markedly different approach: a high-visibility but low-arrest strategy that explicitly rejected mass arrests in favor of direct action to interrupt and deter disorderly behavior. Thus police would order, counsel, educate, cajole, and use other noncoercive methods to discourage offenders, and would arrest them only as a last resort.

The researchers hoped that the disorder counts could be used to allocate officers. Police managers, however, continued to rely on traditional measures to assign police—reported crimes and calls for service.

A crisis, however, made it clear that the street condition reports (as they were called) could be useful. Parks commissioner Gordon Davis threatened to close Bryant Park (adjacent to the main branch of the New York Public Library). Drug dealing had reached epidemic levels. Police could not or would not control it. Police managers responded to Davis's threat and the publicity that followed with an aggressive effort that relied on the low-arrest tactics of Operation Crossroads. Instead of using such traditional means as arrest counts to evaluate their own efforts, they used the condition reports. The results were not only interesting but of great practical value:

- The number of people engaged in positive activities increased by 79 percent; the number of drug sellers, buyers, and users decreased by 85 percent.
- The percentage of loitering and drug-related use as a function of total use declined from 67 percent to 49 percent.
- Drug selling was not displaced en masse to any single location outside the park.
- While the decrease in the number of dealers was not as dramatic as police had hoped, dealers behaved more discretely.
- The aggressiveness of the uniformed officers, not just the fact that they were in the park, appeared to be the key factor in changing the dealers' mode of operation.

- Supervised, directed patrol, rather than the absolute number of officers assigned, seemed critical to affecting conditions in the park.
- Stationing a uniformed officer in front of the library during lunchtime and early afternoon virtually eliminated the clustering of drug activity.

Nevertheless, the project was aborted. Once the crisis was over, police simply were not interested in using the information. As time went on, key personnel were transferred, not to frustrate the project, but as a matter of routine police practice. Soon the funders had little choice but to drop the project altogether.

It does not take much reading between the lines to know what was going on: the police were not about to abandon their traditional ways of evaluating their performance and assigning officers in favor of the low-arrest strategy. Operation Crossroads and the Bryant Park crisis had forced police back into a problem area—disorder—that violated the dominant police paradigm. However police managers might phrase their reluctance, in effect they were unwilling to shift to a system that would measure actual results as citizens might experience them, rather than such apparent efforts as arrests. For the police, the goal was still to demonstrate that “we held up our end,” rather than “we solved the problem.”

Distinguishing between what citizens experience in their neighborhoods, shopping centers, and subways and the official crime problem as defined in crime, response, and arrest statistics is not an academic quibble. For generations, public policy has been built around priorities established in response to these data, satisfying the eternal bureaucratic yen to be evaluated by numbers and process rather than by results. Yet whenever citizens are queried—whether systematically, as in many of the reports noted above, or informally—their greatest complaints always include disorder and an accompanying fear. Statistics which indicate that people are hardly ever raped or murdered in their neighborhood or that help is just a 911 call away offer little comfort. I am certain that if systematic studies were available about the “crime problem” in schools, parks, and public housing, the results would be similar.

Official police doctrine is changing, especially in New York City. The Mayor, the MTA, the Transit Police Department, and the NYPD all strongly endorse the

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notion that police must focus on solving the problems that really upset New Yorkers. By controlling disorder and stemming fear, they will keep citizens on the street and thereby discourage serious crime. Serious programmatic reform plans are already underway, with the most well-known being the Mayor's Safe Streets, Safe City plan.

At the level of theory, the corner has been turned. But the real change will be much harder than is imagined by those who glibly drop phrases like "community policing" and then stand back and wait for miracles. Despite the city's enormous official commitment to community policing, the issue is still very much in doubt. The dominant criminal justice model has been in place a long time and is supported by powerful traditions and mythologies. The task facing police forces here, and across the country, is to turn away from several decades of accumulated, preconceived, and self-regarding notions about their mission, and to discover instead the real needs of the communities they seek to protect.

It is not easy to change an entire subculture. First and foremost, police need to change their own minds about their mission, and give up the view that police work consists of racing around in patrol cars, apprehending criminals after the fact, and feeding them into a "criminal justice system." That "cowboy" version of policing has considerable allure for most of the young people who become police officers, attractions that "problem solving" and community work (often with civilians) do not necessarily have.

Former Chief Robert Igleburger of the Dayton Police Department, one of the country's most innovative police chiefs during the 1960s, has likened police departments to rubber bands. They can be stretched, pulled, and twisted into a variety of shapes, yet whenever pressure is relieved, they snap back into their previous shape. Many forces bridle public organizations: traditions, habits, vested interests of groups both within and outside the organization, political chicanery, public myths, and so forth. As we know from the current experience of the auto industry, which had to be brought to the brink of bankruptcy before it began to reform itself, repositioning organizations is difficult, and keeping them repositioned is harder.

One way to start—one way that has been overlooked so far—is for New York's Police Department to begin a revolution in American crime statistics. They should

move American police (and the American media) away from their unproductive preoccupation with current official data. Taking a cue from Operation Crossroads, the city's police should build new citywide databases that measure the problems that citizens really care about, the ones that spread crime and fear, disrupting the trust of neighbor and community cooperation that is essential to preventing crime. They should develop databases that measure whether police are responding to these problems and databases that measure whether the problems are getting better.

Collaborating with citizens to prevent crime and disorder requires knowing what citizens think about crime and disorder. It is useless to demand that police respond to community needs rather than self-serving bureaucratic standards, unless we know what those needs are. It would be unjust and demoralizing to criticize police for not helping to maintain order (which they have been doing to some extent, albeit fitfully, and without commendation or encouragement throughout the 911, UCR-dominated decades) without the data to prove the case, or to commend them when deserved.

Creating such databases is one thing, maintaining and updating them will require a real commitment of resources and managerial will. For if they are to be useful, the surveys must measure New York's many neighborhoods separately and in detail. To assume that all communities have the same priorities would be fatal to the effort described here.

Yet despite all the work, will, and widgets this effort would consume, it would be very efficient even in the medium term. Such data would be crucial in helping transform police culture and make community policing self-sustaining. By providing police with a new way of thinking about their jobs, they would overcome the entrenched traditions that have impeded past reforms.

Even police who initially regard such community policing tactics as foot patrols with distaste almost always learn to like them as soon as the programs get underway. But liking a duty does not go very far unless it is linked to career advancement. Currently, officers move up in the force by leaving patrol work for a job with a specialized unit. And they are promoted out of patrol by doing things that can be added up statistically, like making lots of arrests, rather than by solving community problems.

In order to truly change the culture of the police department, the department must tie career advancement to the tasks that make community policing work, especially being a good patrol officer. The department will not be able to do this without data. It is, after all, a bureaucracy, and a bureaucracy it will remain until its dying day. As such, it will always want to play by the numbers. So we must find a way to change the numbers and show police officers that the new way to get ahead is to rack up good numbers of a different sort.

For the same reason, the New York Police Department, and all the other departments that follow in its wake, should make an enormous annual or biannual public fuss about the new numbers, crowing shamelessly about every bit of good news, and cheerfully expending the great portions of patience and fortitude it will take to explain them to the press. For to really ensure the future of community policing, we have to change not only the internal culture, but also the public mythology of policing.

As one prominent New York police official has put it, “It’s not just what these guys learn on the force, most of them are cowboys or ‘buffs’ [lovers of police tradition and lore] before they sign up.” And while chiefs battered by the UCR twice a year may no longer be cowboys, there is no doubt that the enormous publicity that accompanies the current statistical measures of performance affects the way police forces behave.

Powerful images sustain the “crime fighting” view of policing: the “thin blue line” and the “wars” on crime, drugs, and violence waged by arresting and incarcerating offenders. The statistical parallels of those images, broadly accepted by the media as a scorecard for police performance, now come back to haunt police. Tragic events, such as killings in schools, get wide publicity and fuel demands that police “do something,” regardless of what it is. Tough measures must be taken against those who are violent. But we must also take tough measures against myths that deflect press, public, and police alike from the real problems of the community.

Not much more than a generation ago, there were other police myths that were powerful and emotionally rewarding: myths of the cop on the beat who knew his block, his people, and what they needed. Officer Murphy—and his nightstick—would not be popular in most New York neighborhoods today. But we can create new heroes of public service in his place, citizen soldiers who know how much their fellow citizens suffer from the grinding, day-to-day incivilities and minor street offenses that erode the quality of urban life, make people afraid, and create the milieu within which serious crime flourishes. Images as powerful as the war metaphors of the 911 era can support them in their struggle. But all this would be made far easier with, and may be impossible without, concrete measures of achievement that redefine successful policing as policing that actually makes people want to live here.